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# Responsibility and the Big Society

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the interplay between Conservative thought as evinced by the current Conservative Party leadership and the idea of responsibility, which is a central concern in the Big Society programme. I show that responsibility holds different meanings based on attitudes to work and the welfare state and that the differentiation in meaning map onto a working class/middle class distinction. I then argue that the 'good society' as it emerges from the Big Society idea would be a more stratified one that accepts large degrees of inequality. Leaving the conceptual plane, I then provide support for my argument with findings from qualitative research into the lifeworld of young Conservatives.

***Keywords: Big Society, Responsibility, Conservative Party, Values, Sociology of Morality, Young Conservatives***

### Introduction

**1.1** In one of the earliest speeches in which David Cameron formulated the concept of the Big Society he said that "the recent growth of the state [under New Labour] has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism" (Cameron 2009) and that societal renewal under the Conservatives would start with focusing on "empowering and enabling individuals, families and communities to take control of their lives so we create avenues through which responsibility and opportunity can develop" (ibid.). Focusing on the conceptual underpinnings of the Big Society programme, I want to address the question who exactly, according to the ideas set out by David Cameron, needs to be more responsible? And what does 'being responsible' entail?

**1.2** I first provide general context to the sociological significance of responsibility and the genesis of the Big Society concept. Analysing the relevant passages in David Cameron's Big Society speech (Cameron 2009), delivered in November 2009 as the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture, I then show that there inheres in the notion of the Big Society a clear distinction between the kind of responsibility that working-class communities are supposed to adopt and the responsibilities that the middle class are intended to exert. This leads me, thirdly, to ask what kind of society, big or small, it actually is that David Cameron and Conservative activists envision. In the last section, drawing on interview material with young Conservatives, I address the question of whether Big Society ideas are reflected by and matter to ordinary members of the Conservative Party.

### Responsibility and the origins of the Big Society idea

**2.1** As a given social order entails a group-based differentiation of responsibilities toward the institutions of the state and other citizens, sociologists are well advised to "make [the concept of responsibility] fruitful for the analysis of the society that is at present taking shape" (Strydom 1999: 65). This is what I intend to do in this rapid response paper.

**2.2** Group-based distinctions of responsibilities can arise in formal ways, e.g. per legal norms, and they can arise as informal distinctions based on class, ethnicity, gender, etc. that underlie moral evaluations in everyday life (Sayer 2005a). Accordingly, a Conservative society, i.e. a society that is structured according to the values that currently dominate the Conservative Party, would hold specific expectations of certain groups regarding the preservation of social justice or duties of loyalty (cf. Haidt and Graham 2007; Strydom 1999). In traditionalism, or Toryism, for instance, "charity [is] viewed as an obligation of the church, of the family and village or neighbourhood, but never of government" (Nisbet 1986: 59).

**2.3** The leadership of David Cameron ushered in a period of transformation in what the Conservative Party would from now on expect of the various groups in society. Responsibility became a much-discussed concept in the transformation process as Cameron stated clearly in the foreword to the 2006 Conservative statement of values *Built to Last* (The Conservative Party 2006) that "this country needs a responsibility revolution". The responsibility revolution, containing calls for a renewal of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility (The Conservative Party 2006), is the predecessor of the current Big Society programme. Like *Built to Last*, the Big Society idea is also seen as testimony of Cameron's belief in compassionate Conservatism (O'Hara 2007: 48). Its ideological roots lie in traditionalism.

### Who is addressed by the call for more responsibility?

**3.1** The main section in the Big Society speech in which the theme of responsibility is developed and discussed is entitled 'Selfishness and Irresponsibility'. It starts like this: "This emphasis [evinced in the previous paragraph, A.B.] on responsibility is absolutely vital. When the welfare state was created, there was an ethos, a culture to our country – of self-improvement, of mutuality, of responsibility." (Cameron

2009) A brief narrative of loss of said ethos follows. Conceptually, the loss of responsibility is here connected to the existence of the welfare state. The connection is a destructive one, for, so the narrative of loss and destruction continues, "as the state continued to expand, it took away from people more and more things they should and could be doing for themselves, their families and their neighbours." (ibid.) Although the identifier 'welfare' is dropped here, Cameron, since he is engaged in the same narrative, must be assumed to be talking about the welfare state. What the core of the Big Society speech is saying, then, is that the welfare state deprived people of the opportunity to 'do things themselves'. People have been led on to be irresponsible by an ever-expanding state.

**3.2** This makes welfare recipients the main targets of the call to behave more responsibly. As the speech goes on, it becomes clear that responsibility is needed especially in terms of welfare recipients' economic and moral behaviour. These two aspects are intimately bound together, evinced in statements like this: "There is less expectation to take responsibility, to work, to stand by the mother of your child, to achieve, to engage your local community […]." (Cameron 2009) Further criticism of the 'benefit system', of the fact that people "are paid more not to work than to work" and that they are "financially better off if they do the wrong thing than if they do the right thing" (ibid.) manifests the impression that the Big Society call for responsibility focuses on a moral renewal and targets predominantly welfare recipients.

**3.3** The belief that prolonged assistance by the state to those in need ossifies people's natural resourcefulness and capability to look after themselves is "written into [the Conservatives'] DNA by Edmund Burke" (*Guardian Editorial,* 11 November 2009). A Conservative dose of 'tough love' – and this may include severe cuts to the public sector, or a 'retrenchment of the state' (Cameron 2009) - can see this right (cf. Lakoff 2002) which is why the Big Society, for Conservative right-wingers, is also the better society (Maude 2010).[1]

**3.4** Alongside the broken-Britain narrative that leads to the conclusion that swathes of poor Britons need to start behaving more responsibly, a second narrative strand is developed telling the story of those who already try to behave responsibly but whose "attempts at playing a role in society are met with inspection, investigation, and interrogation" (Cameron 2009). For these potential stakeholders, a retrenchment of the state would mean, for example, "more power directly in the hands of the parents" (Cameron 2009) when it comes to how their children's school should be run and more power to communities to "agree on the number and type of homes they want, and to provide themselves with permission to expand and lead that development" (ibid.).

**3.5** The will to wield that kind of power and the knowledge of how to set about imposing one's will on a community predominantly lies with the middle and upper class (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Reay 2000). A retrenchment of the state would restore power to these potential stakeholders whilst assistance to the needy would be limited.

**What is the 'good society' from the Conservative point of view?**

**4.1** From the Conservative point of view, the 'good society' is an ordered society in which the middle and upper middle class are active stakeholders. The working class are left to their own devices – not out of spite, however, but because it is the Conservative belief that a lack of assistance will rekindle the flame of self-reliance.

**4.2** The Big Society, if devised along these lines, would not be as innovative a project as David Cameron sometimes makes it out. Margaret Thatcher's 1987 statement that "there is no such thing as society", for one, was followed by words very similar to the ones that Cameron used in his Big Society speech:

> There are individual men and women, there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours. (Thatcher 1987 quoted in O'Hara 2007: 211)

**4.3** Different to Margaret Thatcher's ultimately highly individualistic take on the value of responsibility, however, David Cameron understands that "there are connections between circumstances and behaviour" (Cameron 2006). The Big Society programme that is being implemented by and by therefore aims to affect a moral change towards a culture of responsibility. Margaret Thatcher's "financialisation of everything" (Harvey 2005: 33) and individualism, then, probably best be considered distant cousins of the Big Society.[2]

**4.4** However, as David Cameron tends to "focus on process rather than on outcomes" (Montgomery 2006), it is still possible that the outcomes of the Big Society programme as desired by the Conservative coalition partner would be very similar to the changes affected by Conservative policies in the 1980s and 1990s. For one, activists are very fond of Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism.[3] Secondly, it seems likely that for poor Britons, for the unemployed and for benefit recipients, the alleged repression by the state in the past would in a Big Society be exchanged for a very definite repression by local power-holders. The attribute 'neo-medieval' perhaps sums up the social relationships that the Big Society conceptually entails. It has been used to describe Phillip Blond's (e.g. Blond 2009) sketch of an ideal Conservative society (Gray 2010). Indeed, the Big Society shares its focus on community living with Blond's Red Toryism.[4]

**Is this reflected in Conservatives' conceptions of a better society?**

**5.1** In 2008 and 2009, I conducted fieldwork with a Conservative Association at a Scottish university in order to find out, amongst other things, whether young Conservatives' thinking reflects the tenets of David Cameron's Conservatism.[5] The main aim of my research was to capture and analyse the values that young Conservatives hold and that inhere in the practices that characterise Conservative activism. As the Conservative membership is from diverse economic, social and cultural backgrounds, the biographical stories they tell about Conservatism differ widely. Although ideologically heterogeneous, patterns that relate the young members to Conservatism proper existed. Their standpoints on the responsibilities of poor and unemployed people comprised one such area of commonality.

**5.2** One of my hypotheses was that young Conservatives believe that the Conservative Party does not only advance the material interests of its core voters, i.e. of the middle and upper class, "but that it […] [is also] a party that care[s] for society's most vulnerable people and for quality of life issues like the environment" (Montgomery 2006). Young Conservatives, by this assumption, would consciously aim to ameliorate the 'unfairness of class' (Sayer 2005a) and to eradicate social inequality.

**5.3** This assumption has been partially proven correct. During the time of my fieldwork, the Conservative Association made a point of often wearing hooded sweatshirts, or 'hoodies'. Hoodies are not the standard apparel of Conservatives. To the contrary, in 2006, when a shopping centre in Kent attempted to ban the wearing of hoodies on its premises, they were (somewhat exaggeratedly) identified and discussed as a piece of clothing predominantly worn by poor, inner-city adolescents (*BBC News online,* 10 July 2006). The

majority of Conservatives, in contrast, belong to the middle class (Whiteley 2009). Yet hoodies were the centre piece of a recruitment campaign that the young Conservatives carried out in 2009. Cheekily referencing David Cameron's so-called 'hug a hoodie' speech (Cameron 2006), the campaign consisted of manning an information stall with hoodie-wearing young Conservatives who hugged the passers-by who seemed interested in Conservative campaign material. I have described this elsewhere as a dressing-down strategy that was intended to help decontaminate the Tory brand (Bednarek 2011). By showing young Party members to be warm-hearted and unassuming people the message would be conveyed that the Conservative Party is a truly inclusive party, that 'we are all in this together'.

**5.4** A different and much more complex picture emerges when analysing young Conservatives' reflections on a range of social groups and issues. Generally speaking, One-Nation Tories evince the same kind of inclusive speaking patterns as does David Cameron. But One-Nation Tories are rare; there were only three of those among my research participants, and only one of them took an inclusive stance towards welfare recipients. This young Conservative had lived through poverty:

> As a kid, my mum was a single mother, on benefits, first living in sheltered accommodation for homeless […] we were getting our clothes from charity shops and when she went to collect her money from the post office she'd get little cans of food on her benefit cheque.

**5.5** The sociological assumption would be that the childhood experience of deprivation predisposes this young man to have compassion with the poor. However, another research participant of a similar socio-economic and experiential background was a staunch Thatcherite and of the opinion that welfare recipients are people who "don't try hard enough" because they are "lazy". This suggests that the economic, social and cultural determinants of one's childhood do not 'produce' certain values in a monocausal way, as for instance Inglehart (e.g. Abramson and Inglehart 1995; Inglehart and Norris 2003) would argue, which complicates the sociological study of political values.

**5.6** Rather than considering structural explanations of welfare recipients' behaviour, as for example the concept of the Big Society does, it is generally agreed among young Conservatives that welfare recipients are people who fail to take responsibility for themselves. Indignation is a common reaction to this, as is disdain. Both emotional reactions characterise the passages discussing inhabitants of council estates. The emotional canopy associated with speaking of unemployed or poor people inevitably involves the drawing of moral boundaries between the speaker and 'them' (cf. Kirk 2006; Sayer 2002). The following quote is exemplary for this:

> The people [on the council estate] - they lacked ambition! I know it's such a horrible thing to say about people living around you! It is such a horrible thing to say but I have nothing in common with them at all.

**5.7** The 'I have nothing in common with them at all'-theme is the more significant since the speaker lived on a council estate herself. Markers of poverty are devalued in the way she speaks about the estate, whilst her own willingness to "work hard" at school emerges as the responsible way of behaving.

> [We] moved onto an estate which was one of the worst estates in the area, yah. We had absolutely nothing. I went to a bad school, an absolutely awful school, and I had pretty bad behaviour problems because of the changes and I thought 'I'm not going to buy into this. I'll work hard.' For all intents and purposes I should not be at university because of where I came from school-wise for my A-Levels. And yet – I did it! When people don't try hard enough, I don't have time for that, at all. Because I don't buy laziness, I don't buy into the welfare state the way it's currently used.

**5.8** 'Working hard' is the primary means of distinction between the narrator and her peers who are labelled as "lazy" and "buys into the welfare system", and it is working hard which constitutes her not having anything in common with them. The maxim "we are hard-working, they are lazy" (Sayer 2005b: 953) is one of the means by which moral boundaries are erected in the above passage.

**5.9** Similar incidents of moral boundary drawing occurred in other research interviews. One narrator, describing the working-class small town that she grew up in, ends on this note:

> I just wanted out, I hated it, I hated the small town syndrome, I hated the neds, I hated the chavs, I hated the fact that there was never anything to do, there was never anywhere to go, I hated the fact that all my friends just sat around on park benches and got drunk because there was nothing for them.

Whenever the narrator of this passage visits her hometown, she says, "I don't feel like I've got anything in common with that place at all".

**5.10** The moral boundaries that are established in the quoted passages evolve around the notion of being worthy through aspiring to transcend the structural limitations of the place of residence or birth. As a worthy individual, one must try to rise above the council estate or the working-class small town. Failure to do this cannot be blamed on circumstances. Responsibility and personal moral worth thus overlap in this version of Conservative thought, both also being connected with a strong depreciation of working-class culture.

**5.11** Middle-classness, in contrast, is generally valorised in the way Conservatives talk. Two of the older Conservatives that participated in my study claimed "freedom of the individual", "the free-market situation" and 'running my business my way' as central tenets of Conservatism:

> I think the core values are in terms of the, you know, the individual is important, erm freedom in terms of freedom of the individual, you know, the non-interference in terms of the state, obviously the free-market situation […] Very much focused on the individual, very much concerned with the freedom of the individual.

> I find that [young people] are increasingly coming back to our values which are 'I don't want government to tell me how to run my business', you know, or 'I'm finding that I'm getting far too much interference on a day-to-day basis by the state who's trying to tell me what to do, and I'm now just up against a brick wall in trying to talk to them', or 'there are so many people interfering and telling me to do it that way and then someone else comes along and tells me to do it this way.'

**5.12** The reference to 'running my business' makes clear that thinking about Conservatism very seldom, for Conservatives, means thinking about working-class, unemployed or poor people. Indeed, Big Society ideals pale and lose significance compared to the prevalence, impact and sway that neoliberal economics and their concomitant ideological underpinnings have on the membership. It is therefore much more likely to hear a young Conservative echo the belief in individualism expressed in the two quotes above than to hear them speak about welfare recipients with compassion and understanding. The following statement,

made by a young Conservative, is thus fairly typical.

> I'm quite a big fan of, erm, sort of encouraging individual responsibility and erm that's very important and also a fan of the fairly traditional democratic sort of values on crime, or maybe on immigration and especially on Europe and those sorts of things.

**5.13** These are not isolated opinions by handful of Conservatives who would be widely deemed non-representative for contemporary Conservatism. To the contrary, comparing statements made by the Party leadership on the Big Society idea, by the right-wing media and by the membership, a consensus emerges. Ultimately, 'caring for society's most vulnerable people' (Montgomery 2006) is not a central concern for a significant proportion of Conservatives.

**Summary**

**6.1** Focusing on the different ways in which responsibility is addressed and discussed among Conservatives, I argued that for poor, unemployed and working-class people, being empowered and therefore free from the reach of an overly bureaucratic state may not be advantageous, the reason being that the Big Society idea entails two different kinds of responsibility.

**6.2** The Big Society is one that is socio-economically more stratified, in which it is local power-holders identifying and looking out for the people in need and who administer assistance as they see fit. The notion of empowerment that is at the core of the Big Society idea thus applies positively to those groups in British society who, over the last decade or so, have felt that their range of action was rather limited due to interference by the state. These will be business owners, teachers' associations, parents –in short, Edmund Burke's 'small platoons'. They are already capable of exercising responsibility and need freedom from interference of the state.

**6.3** In contrast, the working class and the poor who have hitherto relied on the state, should attempt to be self-reliant, to 'make do' without the help of the state. This is what responsibility entails for the working class. Due to this fundamental difference, the responsibility discourse as it is waged among Conservatives is best understood as a specific instance of discussing the failures of the working class with the use of euphemisms, i.e. by replacing 'working class' with 'those that are irresponsible' (Sayer 2005a; Valentine 1998).

**Conclusion**

**7.1** I showed that young Conservative activists evince attitudes and values that are in support of the moral differentiation between irresponsible poor people and hampered, well-meaning, and ambitious middle-class individuals. For them, the good Conservative society is one premised on the acceptance of social inequality which they believe to be an unchangeable fact of life. Responses regarding the role of the welfare state differ, paternalist Conservatives being on the whole more favourable of state involvement. These Conservatives I found to be a small minority, however.

**7.2** Structural barriers to self-reliance and the expression of responsibility such as scarcity of resources are not accounted for by the Big Society programme. Being responsible for oneself, although clearly a matter that is influenced by is economic and social circumstances, is individualised and moralised. The Big Society idea thus shows the character of the 'responsibility revolution' which preceded it and from which it emerged to be first and foremost a moral revolution (cf. Hennessy, Kite et al. 2011) but likely one that struggles to fully accommodate social facts in its programme of social and cultural transformation. Furthermore, it is possible that the moral transformation associated with the Big Society would in fact work to reverse the "shift […] from the traditional emphasis on individual responsibility […] to a new conception of collective and co-responsibility" (Strydom 1999: 67). The potential of this development in itself indicates that a renewal of interest in the sociological study of responsibility and an intensification of sociological interest in Conservatism would stand us in good stead for comprehending British society-to-be.

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## Notes

[1] Right-wingers fail to be convinced, however, so much so that a renewed attempt to explain what the Big Society means was undertaken earlier this year. The only value propagated by the Big Society that finds favour with the Conservative membership is "reforms to welfare that encourage greater independence" (Montgomery 2011). This probably explains why the impression has emerged that the Big Society is a euphemism for 'cuts to the welfare system'. Support of welfare reforms rank third on a list of 17 beliefs defining mainstream Conservatism and is only superseded by "limits on 'nanny state'" and "strong defence" (ibid.).

[2] Maurice Cowling, comparing Margaret Thatcher's politics with other Conservative approaches, suggested that one should be "careful not to confine 'politics' to creating the conditions in which economic growth is possible" (Cowling 1978: 2).

[3] During my fieldwork, Tim Bale's assessment that Conservatives "admire Thatcher without worshipping her" (Bale 2010: 379) often struck me as an understatement.

[4] David Cameron's espousal of Blond's ideas has only ever been partial, however, as Blond's 'self-conscious nostalgia' clashes with Cameron's ostentatious push for modernisation (Harris 2009).

[5] I spent 12 months with a University Conservative Association (UCA) at a Scottish University during which I attended the weekly meetings (which lasted approximately two hours each) and accompanied the young Conservatives to several formal events as well as four regional conferences. I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 17 young Conservatives. I also interviewed 3 older Conservatives. The UCA had approximately 30 active members at the time and was in steady contact with the local Association's young Conservatives as well as Conservative students at other Scottish universities. As passionate political activists, UCA members were involved in both student politics as well as regional and Party politics. They supported by campaigning and canvassing a range of candidates in the months leading up to the 2010 election and were also involved in a variety of youth events.

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